

CONTINUITY PLANNING FOR SCHOOLS & UNIVERSITIES

(as published in the December 2005 issue of *American School & University*)

http://asumag.com/mag/university_disaster_strikes/

There are important differences between the manner in which a school or university conducts its operations and the manner in which a corporation conducts its business. The entire purpose of operations, the presence of large numbers of students, the style of management, and etc. are all greatly different between a school (K-12), college, university or other academic institution and a business.

Typically in the mission statement of a school or university Continuity of Operation Plan (COOP) the primary objectives are stated as the maintenance of life support and environmental health services. Great emphasis is placed in responding to emergency events ('incident response') and less emphasis is often placed on continuity planning. In an academic setting teaching and research activities can be suspended for a period of time without loss of revenue or long-term loss of education. This article examines some of the unique characteristics as well as some of the common problem areas within a typical school or university COOP.

Plan Organization & Key Individuals

Rigid organizational structures are not normally found within the educational community. The usual approach employed by educational institutions to address a problem is to establish a committee to analyze the facts and make recommendations. This 'group' or 'committee' management style approach assembles a large range of ideas and generally produces satisfactory results over a fairly long period of time. In developing the COOP this approach is acceptable but in executing the COOP during an actual emergency situation the approach will not work effectively.

In an emergency situation quick decisions regarding the appropriate response measures are necessary. There is frequently not time to gather and analyze various opinions. Also a single individual must be in charge and if that individual is not present a 'chain-of-command' must be utilized. This type of management structure is not common in an academic community.

We suggest that the school or university designate an **Emergency Response Team (ERT)** for responding to emergency situations. We recommend the ERT utilize the Incident Command System. This is a recognized, effective management approach utilized by FEMA to make tactical decisions during an actual emergency. The use of the Incident Command System will also facilitate the ability to interface with responding government entities utilizing the same organizational structure.

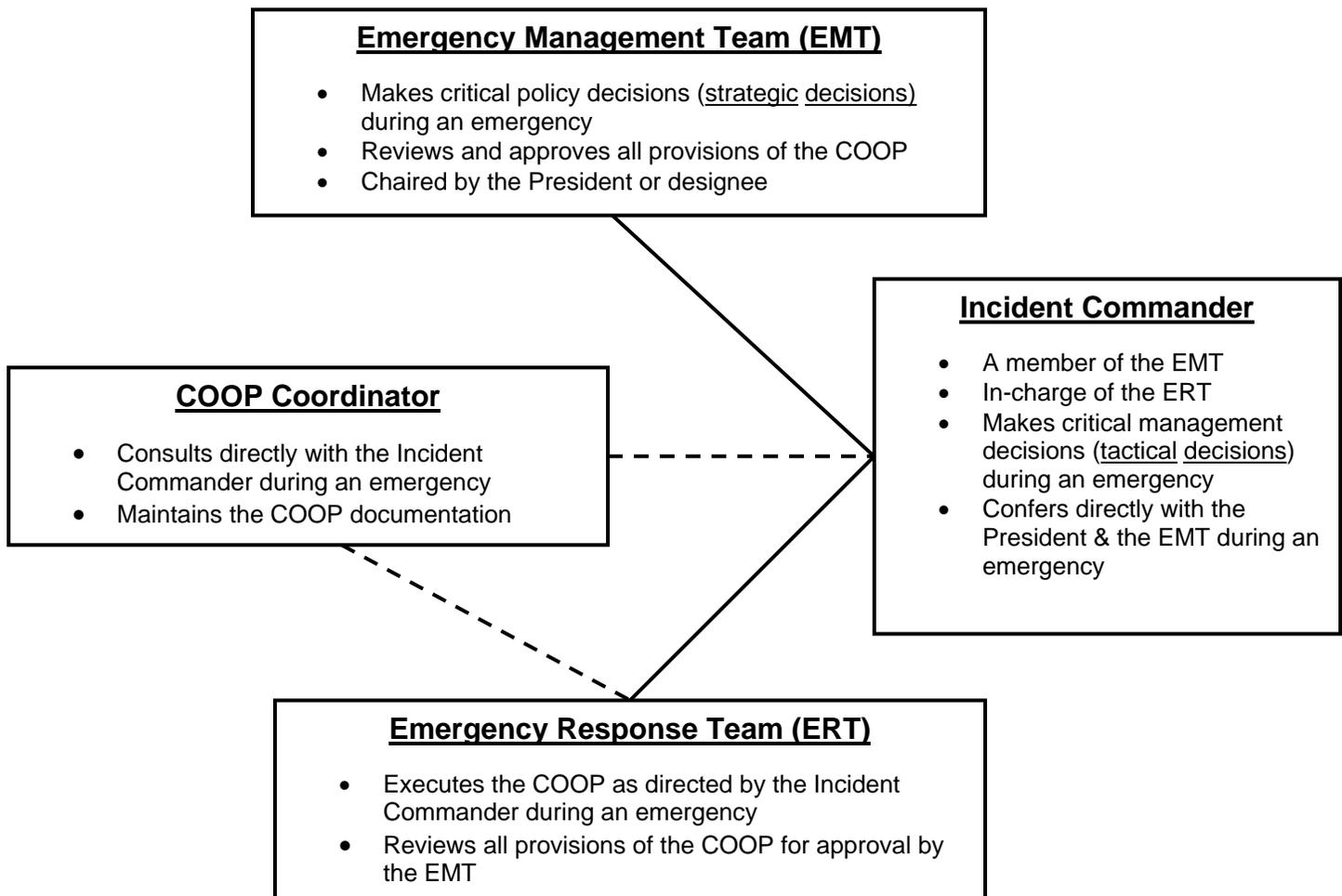
Together with the Emergency Response Team we also suggest the designation of an **Emergency Management Team (EMT)** to determine the institution's policy. The Emergency Management Team is an assemblage of senior-level officials appointed by the President/Superintendent to advise and assist in making emergency-related policy decisions. The Emergency Management Team is structured in a committee style consistent with typical academic institutional practices. The overall ERT and EMT management structure couples an effective mechanism for handling an emergency with a management style compatible with practices in an educational setting.

This plan should be promulgated under the authority of the **President/Superintendent**. All decisions concerning the discontinuation of normal function, cancellation of classes, or cessation of operations, rest with the President/Superintendent or his/her designee.

The **Incident Commander** is a senior member of the Emergency Management Team and is in charge of the Emergency Response Team. The Incident Commander is the individual responsible for the command and control of all aspects of an emergency situation. Clearly the Incident Commander must have the authority and ability to make quick decisions in an emergency situation.

The **COOP Coordinator** is a key member of the Emergency Response Team who is responsible for the maintenance of the COOP. The COOP Coordinator consults directly with the Incident Commander during an actual emergency.

Relationships and Primary Responsibilities



Continuity Planning

With great focus on incident response planning, continuity planning issues are sometimes not adequately addressed. This appears to be particularly true for major disasters that damage or contaminate multiple facilities. Most schools or universities have not experienced a major disaster such as a powerful earthquake, major hurricane, F4 tornado, WMD release, etc. Although these types of events are rare, virtually every institution has some level of exposure. Without a good COOP in place a school or university may have a number of problems returning to normal operations. If the disaster causes educational activities to be cancelled for several weeks, an extended semester or even a suspension of classes for a semester might have to be considered.

Schools and universities should start with conducting a Risk and Impact Analysis (RIA). The RIA will investigate the various internal & external plus natural & manmade threats to which the school or university is exposed. The RIA will also develop a recovery strategy in the event a major disaster occurs. Once a recovery strategy is agreed upon the details of the recovery action steps can be defined in the COOP.

The COOP should develop a time-phase recovery process. After a major disaster where multiple buildings are damaged the Campus environment also will likely be dangerous. Regardless of the type of disaster, the disaster recovery steps after a major event can be summarized as follows:

Disaster Recovery Steps

Action Step #1 – Immediate Actions (to be completed within 12-hours after the event)⁽¹⁾

- Address injuries and immediate dangers
- Establish a Safe and Secure Environment
- Initial Damage Assessment
- Organize and assemble the ERT (if not already accomplished ⁽²⁾)
- Establish the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) (if not already accomplished)
- Activate alternate site plans (if applicable and if not already accomplished)

Action Step #2 – Initial Recovery (to be completed from 12 to 48-hours after the event)⁽¹⁾

- Comprehensive Damage Assessment
- Restore Basic Services
- Contact External Resources
- Resident students may need to be sent home (if not already accomplished)

Action Step #3 – Campus Recovery (to be completed within 3-weeks after the event)⁽¹⁾

- Building Damage Repair
- Alternate Facilities secured / Temporary Structures erected

Action Step #4 – Campus Opening

- Students return to campus
- Classes resume
- Student Housing reopens

Action Step #5 – Plan Review

- Review Action Steps taken
- Revise documentation & procedures

⁽¹⁾ Times are approximate; the ERT should complete the Action Steps as quickly as possible.

⁽²⁾ For certain types of disasters with warning periods (hurricanes, floods, etc.) some action steps can be executed in advance of the disaster. The above steps are the basic guidelines. The COOP will need to define the recovery action steps in much more detail.

Incident Response

We generally find that schools and universities have developed good incident response procedures for most emergency events. Plans for facility evacuations, sheltering of students, and responding to routine emergencies are typically in place. One area that is sometimes overlooked is the 'Emergency Lockdown' or 'Shelter-in-Place' procedure.

Over the last few years, Terrorist Attacks and Hostile Intruder situations have emerged as serious threats. These threats require Shelter-in-Place procedures to be executed – the exact opposite of a Facility Evacuation. Terrorist Attacks and Hostile Intruder situations constitute life-threatening events and conducting a Facility Evacuation or failing to respond properly could be a fatal mistake. Note that Shelter-in-Place procedures are also appropriate for other situations such as external hazardous releases and, with some modification, tornado emergencies.

The need to communicate emergency instructions during a crisis situation is central to the effectiveness of executing the procedure. Communicating accurate and sufficiently detailed information represents an important challenge. Typically fire alarms alert everyone to conduct a Facility Evacuation. At a minimum some type of siren is needed to alert everyone to a dangerous condition outside and that a Shelter-in-Place needs to be performed. Ideally an intercom system is available to communicate more detailed information about the threat.

Organizational Units

Each organizational unit (the various departments, organizational groups, divisions or other defined infrastructure entities of the school or university – Facilities Department, Finance & Administration, EH&S, etc.) with important disaster preparation and/or response assignments will need to develop an Organizational Unit Plan. Organizational Unit Plans are often developed individually under a 'silo approach' rather than under an 'enterprise-wide approach.' Under this silo approach the resulting plans vary widely in terms of organization and detail. It is not uncommon to find some organizational units with excellent plans and other organizational units without any formal plan in place.

Frequently only very general guidelines coordinate the Organizational Unit Plans. Responding to emergency events by a school system or university involves a large number of individuals from different areas. Many of these individuals do not work together on a day-to-day basis. In an actual emergency situation many individuals have important areas of responsibility and must be able to coordinate their efforts. Periodic plan exercises involving the entire ERT and key members of the EMT will help alleviate this problem.

The central or overarching COOP should clearly designate specific responsibilities for each organizational unit. This will assure that no important responsibilities are either missed or duplicated. The COOP should also define guidelines for the development of the Organizational Unit Plan. At a minimum an outline of an Organizational Unit Plan should be provided and ideally a template should be developed to assist each organizational unit with their planning needs.

About the Author

Douglas M. Henderson (FSA, CBCP) is the President of Disaster Management, Inc., has 20 years of experience in the management and human resources fields with major consulting firms. In August of 1992, Doug was the key associate of the Emergency Response Team for a consulting firm located in South Miami-Dade County. Inspired by the real life business experience with Hurricane Andrew, Doug founded Disaster Management, Inc. in 1993. For additional information Doug can be reached at doug@disastermgt.com or (772) 335-9750.